

16 September 1981

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence

FROM : Robert M. Gates

SUBJECT : Covert Action in the 80s

1. I have read the Frank Lindsay memorandum you forwarded to me and believe, 13 years after it was written, that its judgments continue to be timely and accurate. As we think about the future of covert action, I would pick out the following major points he has made as valid foundations for our own work:

- "Covert operations should be called upon only when something should be done in a secret manner and only when secrecy is possible." (page 1) As this country looks increasingly to covert action as an instrument of foreign policy in an era of "no war, no peace," we are likely to be asked to do more and more things covertly because of the political difficulties here of going forward with them in a more public manner. This will significantly increase the risk of public disclosures.

- "Covert operations can rarely achieve an important objective alone." More often than not, our covert operations are seen as a way to accomplish a policy objective (if there is one) on the cheap, to cope with a problem where no one has any idea how to obtain public support for a solution to the problem, or to use covert action as a short-term tactic to fend off a problem or disaster--a tactic to be repeated or expanded upon in the absence of the ingenuity, will, or money to come up with a viable long-term overt option. In the ideal world, a covert action proposal would be accompanied by a paper from the Department of State or the NSC Staff which would identify the larger policy context of a covert action and identify an overt program which would be approved simultaneously with the covert action as the real, longer-term solution to a problem.

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an ideal world does not exist. Therefore, I believe it is incumbent upon CIA as it forwards a covert action proposal, when appropriate, to accompany it with an analytical judgment as to the kinds of overt programs by the United States that our analysts judge might be effective over the longer term in resolving a problem or issue in a targeted country. This has the benefit of putting covert action in context as a short-term tactic and, internally, requiring our covert operators and our analysts to interact more closely in identifying both the real nature of a problem in a country and how it might be ameliorated. But, what is important here is a better understanding on the part of policy-makers that covert action is rarely a long-term solution to any problem and that they must face up to their responsibilities to develop viable longer-range policies in situations where covert action has bought them some time.

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-- "The more democratic the country or the more open its politics, the greater the possibility of damage [if a U.S. covert action is discovered]."

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2. My overall impression upon reading this paper, and as I think about covert action in the future, is that we perhaps need to focus more on the criteria set forth by Lindsay.

- Covert action operations can rarely achieve an important objective alone.
- Covert operations are best suited to tactical situations where success will bring an immediate short-term gain.
- Large operations cannot be kept secret.
- CIA should concentrate on doing the special clandestine things that it is expected to be especially competent in accomplishing.

3. I do not have the kind of creativity that is especially suited to conceiving of covert actions; but I do know something about international politics and bureaucracies, and what I know tells me that Lindsay's guidelines generally make a great deal of sense. I think you do not have, in the senior management of the DDO, people who can think conceptually about covert action in the 80s in the context of these criteria and of the political conditions that are likely to prevail during that period. Thus, I am drawn to the benefits of bringing together a group of four to six outsiders--perhaps including some CIA retirees who were especially good in this area--who have good instincts on these matters and ask them to brainstorm the question for a few days and provide you with their ideas. The point would not be for them to devise specific covert actions but for them to consider the world of the 80s and 90s and to develop some ideas on generic types of covert actions (including paramilitary operations) that you, the DDCI, the DDO, and perhaps even the Executive Committee might examine as we plan for the years ahead.

Robert M. Gates

cc: DDCI

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